

Age and wisdom

Older and wiser?

Americans get wiser with age. Japanese are wise from the start

ONE stereotype of wisdom is a wizened Zen-master smiling **benevolently** at the antics of his pupils, while **referring to** them as little grasshoppers or some such affectation, safe in the knowledge that one day they, too, will have been set on the path that leads to wizened masterhood. But is it true that age brings wisdom? A study two years ago in North America, by Igor Grossmann of the University of Waterloo, in Canada, suggested that it is. In as much as it is possible to quantify wisdom, Dr Grossmann found that elderly Americans had more of it than youngsters. He has, however, now extended his investigation to Asia—the land of the wizened Zen-master—and, in particular, to Japan. There, he found, **in contrast to** the West, that the grasshoppers are their masters' equals almost from the beginning.

Dr Grossmann's study, just published in *Psychological Science*, recruited 186 Japanese from various **walks of life** and **compared** them **with** 225 Americans. Participants were asked to read a series of **pretend** newspaper articles. Half described conflict between groups, such as a debate between residents of an **impoverished** Pacific island over whether to allow foreign oil companies to operate there following the discovery of petroleum. (Those **in favour** viewed it as an opportunity to get rich; those against feared the disruption of ancient ways and potential ecological damage.) The other half took the form of advice columns that dealt with conflicts between individuals: siblings, friends and spouses. After reading each article, participants were asked "What do you think will happen after that?" and "Why do you think it will happen this way?" Their responses were recorded and **transcribed**.

Dr Grossmann and his colleagues removed age-related information from the transcripts, and also any clues to participants' nationalities, and then passed the edited versions to a group of assessors. These assessors were trained to rate transcribed responses **consistently**, and had been tested to show that their ratings were statistically **comparable** with one another.

The assessors scored participants' responses on a scale of one to three. This attempted **to capture the degree** to which they discussed what psychologists consider five crucial aspects of wise reasoning: willingness to seek opportunities to resolve conflict; willingness to search for compromise; recognition of the limits of personal knowledge; **awareness** that more than one perspective on a problem can exist; and **appreciation** of the fact that things may get worse before they get better.

A score of one on any aspect indicated a participant gave no consideration to it. A score of two indicated some consideration. A score of three indicated a great deal of consideration. Each participant's scores were then added up and mathematically transformed to create an overall value within a range of zero to 100 for both interpersonal and intergroup wisdom.

The **upshot** was that, as Dr Grossmann had found before, Americans do get wiser with age. Their intergroup wisdom score averaged 45 at the age of 25 and 55 at 75. Their interpersonal score similarly climbed from 46 to 50. Japanese scores, by contrast, hardly varied with age. Both 25-year-olds and 75-year-olds had an average intergroup wisdom of 51. For interpersonal wisdom, it was 53 and 52.

Taken at face value, these results suggest Japanese learn wisdom faster than Americans. One up, then, to the wizened Zen-masters. But they also suggest a paradox. Generally, America is seen as an individualistic society, whereas Japan is quite collectivist. Yet Japanese have higher scores than Americans for the sort of interpersonal wisdom you might think would be useful in an individualistic society. Americans, by contrast—at least in the maturity of old age—have more intergroup wisdom than the **purportedly** collectivist Japanese. Perhaps, then, you need individual skills when society is collective, and social ones when it is individualistic. All of which goes to show that the real root of wisdom is this: do not assume, little grasshopper, that your prejudices are correct.

Vocabulary tasks

Use the given words in the following sentences.

transcribe consistent appreciation pretend contrast impoverish captured benevolent degree comparable upshot walk awareness favour

1) Authors, who may come from any _____ of life, should be willing to be photographed.

- 2) We're building a _____ rocket to the moon.
- 3) The size of a dolphin's brain is _____ to a human's.
- 4) Deep down inside, you see, I still believed that life was basically _____.
- 5) Senior ministers spoke in _____ of the proposal.
- 6) The TV camera _____ Dad waving as he left the airplane.
- 7) Much of the credit for the rise of Holocaust _____ belongs to the survivors of the horror themselves.
- 8) As Lynn got older, her _____ for her hometown grew.
- 9) The _____ was that after much argument they all agreed to help her.
- 10) The stock lost 60 cents a share, in _____ to last year, when it gained 21 cents.
- 11) He had been asked to _____ an ancient manuscript.
- 12) Newspapers vary in the _____ to which they emphasize propaganda rather than information.
- 13) Many patients worry that paying for treatments will _____ them.
- 14) Teaching by example has been a _____ theme in his work.